







# MUSEUM NEWS

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DETAIL, HEAD OF MADONNA AND CHILD

PESELLINO

THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART, EDWARD DRUMMOND LIBBEY COLLECTION

## PESELLINO'S MASTERPIECE

RARELY indeed can an American museum lay claim to the acquisition of the masterpiece of an artist of the Renaissance. Particularly has this been true in these war years when, with European sources of supply cut off, the art market has been exceedingly thin. It is, then, a source of considerable pride that the Toledo Museum has secured as the gift of Edward Drummond Libbey the Madonna and Child with St. John, rated by such authorities as Bernard Berenson and Philip Hendy as the best of the works of Pesellino.

This artist has given scholars many a pretty problem. By his hand there is but one documented picture known to exist, and that, by these very documents of his own time, is proclaimed to be but in part his work. To determine what portion of this panel is his and what is not has taxed the ingenuity of many an art critic. Moreover a century ago the painting was cut into pieces and widely dispersed as five independent pictures. Only within the past twenty years have they been reassembled in the National Gallery, London.

To gather about the name of Pesellino a reasonable number of works to reconstruct his artistic personality, so that he may be something more than a wraith among painters, has been the pleasant task of many scholars. Each perforce has had to work from the known to the unknown, attaching to his name pictures showing characteristic handiwork evident in the parts of the one picture known to be by him. From it, the last effort of his life, it has been necessary to work backward step by step and thus establish a logical progression for his output.

This one work of Pesellino which is mentioned in contemporary records is the altarpiece for the Church of the Holy Trinity at Pistoia. It was commissioned of him in 1455 and was incomplete at the time of his death in 1457. Because of this, we have quite a bit of information about it. In 1453 Pesellino had entered into partnership with Piero di Lorenzo di Pratese and Zanobi di Migliore. Zanobi dropped out of the firm before long. The other partners continued until death parted them. Thereafter Pesellino's widow and his partner were engaged in a law suit over the distribution of the proceeds from the painting for the church at Pistoia. Piero di Lorenzo made no claim that he was responsible for any part of the execution of the commission but only contended that under the partnership agreement he was entitled to half of the compensation which either of them received from any work. The price was to have been between 150 and 200 florins. The widow received as her share 85 florins which, as half of the proceeds, would indicate that





THE TRINITY AND SAINTS

PESELLINO

COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON

the work was well along toward completion when Pesellino died. In 1458 the finishing of the painting was entrusted to Filippo Lippi.

Completed, the altarpiece remained in Italy until the early years of the nineteenth century, when it was purchased by William Young Ottley and taken to England. As now shown in the National Gallery, London, only the lower right hand corner of the panel is missing. It is generally thought that the figure of God above the Christ on the Cross is the work of Lippi, that the four saints, two on each side of the cross, and the two angels in the upper corners are the work of Pesellino, although there have been numerous allotments of various parts of the work between them and to other artists.

The same artistic handwriting found in the Trinity, and especially in the figures of Saints Zeno and Jerome, appears in the paint-





DETAIL, THE TRINITY AND SAINTS

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ing now in the Toledo Museum of Art. The background is formed by parted curtains of rich golden brocade and a rose hedge. This hedge is perhaps responsible for the occasional attribution of the





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picture to Pier Francesco Fiorentino. The gold of the curtains and the angels' wings is repeated in the haloes of the Madonna, the Child, and St. John, and in the embroidery of the Madonna's garments. The Child stands on a ledge in front of His Mother and holds a little bird to his lips. St. John and two angels complete the composition.





THE MADONNA AND CHILD

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COURTESY OF THE ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON

The Director-elect of the National Gallery, London, Mr. Philip Hendy, has long been one of the enthusiastic admirers of this painting. We can point to the analogies between it and the Trinity in the





MADONNA AND CHILD, ST. JOHN AND ANGELS

LIPPI-PESELLINO IMITATOR

COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK

National Gallery in no better way than by quoting, with his permission, from his article on Pesellino which appeared in the Burlington Magazine in August, 1928:



time the public could admire its singular beauty and the student familiar with the National Gallery picture could note the very close resemblance between the two. The richly enamelled flesh with its rounded modelling contrasted with the rather angular folding of the draperies, the types, the details of eyes, mouths, ears and feet, the sculptural convention of the coiffures and the curiously embossed eyebrows, all knit the two pictures closely together in the same mature moment of the painter's career. The National Gallery altarpiece cannot be fairly discussed as design, since a fifth part is missing† and the other four so unbeautifully reunited, but Mrs. Pratt's [the Toledo] picture must always have been the more beautiful. Here he was working in the decorative sphere of which he had the full liberty, and the success he attained was evidently immediately recognized by his contemporaries: for the picture was broadcast in innumerable copies and adaptations by Pier Francesco and other confectioners. Pesellino evidently took as his model the reliefs with which Rossellino and other contemporary sculptors were gaining enormous popularity, and his panel is the nearest pictorial equivalent to the painted stuccos beginning to be conspicuous then in every private chapel and now in every museum of sculpture. Similarly the textures which he created were not so much suggestive of living reality as of the gorgeous materials of sculptured decoration. The ivory richness of the flesh, the golden sheen of the pale crimson dress, and of the hair lead up to the actual gold of the wings and haloes and of the curtains parted to bring the relief of fresh air and roses to so much substantial splendour.

"The exhibition of Mrs. Pratt's [the Toledo] picture at Cambridge made it possible to examine it on the same day with *The Virgin and Child* in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum at Boston, a picture which had an almost equal success, for it too was copied unceasingly in Pesellino's studio \* \* \*. The Gardner Museum picture with its marbled niche in place of gold curtains is a less splendid ornament than Mrs. Pratt's. It has more of that woodenness in the figures perceptible in Pesellino's earlier pictures, and no doubt belongs to a slightly previous moment in his career, but the heads of *Virgin and Child* in Mrs. Pratt's picture are scarcely more than an improvement upon those at Fenway Court, and the enamelled texture of the flesh, the fall of

†This, the panel of Saints Zeno and Jerome, was replaced with the others soon after this article was written, and the mounting of all was then materially improved. The predella panels, by an assistant of Filippo Lippi, were also lent by their owner, Mr. Felix Warburg, and framed with the major panel. They are not shown in the reproduction herewith.



the draperies and the whole sculpturesque conception are the same. The embossed eyebrows are there more pronounced, even more akin to those of the National Gallery picture."

Mr. Hendy has mentioned the great contemporary popularity of our Madonna and that in the Gardner collection. Copies of one or the other, or adaptations from them, are to be found in the Uffizi, Florence; the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, Berlin; the Victoria and Albert, London; the Jacquemart André, Paris; the Fogg Museum, Cambridge; the Metropolitan Museum, New York; and in numerous private collections.

That in the Metropolitan (Friedsam Bequest) is, in the main, amazingly similar in general concept to our own painting, save for a complete change of the background and the introduction of three additional angels and the dove of the Holy Ghost. It is assigned to one of the Lippi-Pesellino imitators rather than to the rather indefensible Pseudo-Pier Francesco Fiorentino. Quite recently a less elaborate variant, attributed to Pier Francesco Fiorentino, has been sold with the Richard M. Hurd Collection.

Many antecedents of our picture exist. Mr. Hendy has mentioned the Madonna and Child in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, which was probably painted between 1450 and 1455. Perhaps the most interesting analogies to our painting and the source of at least a part of its great charm are found in Filippo Lippi's Madonna and Child now in the Uffizi. The faces of the supporting angel in the Lippi, and of the angel leaning over the back of the Madonna's throne in the Pesellino, are so closely related that there must be some connection between them. Lippi introduced the smile into Florentine art, and is said to have taken street urchins for his models when painting angels or the Christ Child. (One writer refers to this very angel as the "guttersnipe" type!) Pesellino surely derived his angel in our picture from that in Lippi's, or at least from the same model. That he derived it from the painting rather than the model would seem the more likely, unless, indeed, both model and painting were his sources. The Lippi Madonna has been dated by competent scholars in the year 1455. Pesellino died in 1457. Therefore the date of our painting can be confined in very narrow limits, and it is safe to say that it was painted in 1455 or thereabouts.

A Pesellino Madonna earlier than both those in the Toledo and Gardner Museums is that in the Kress Collection in the National Gallery, Washington. Here the niche of variegated stone which forms the background is somewhat simpler than was that in the Gardner panel. This picture was probably done between 1445 and 1450, in the early years of Pesellino's activity. Hence we see in the head of the Madonna a reminiscence of the waning influence of Fra



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THE TRIUMPHS OF PETRARCH: FAME, TIME, AND ETERNITY

BY PESELLINO



THE TRIUMPHS OF PETRARCH: LOVE, CHASTITY, AND DEATH

BY PESELLINO



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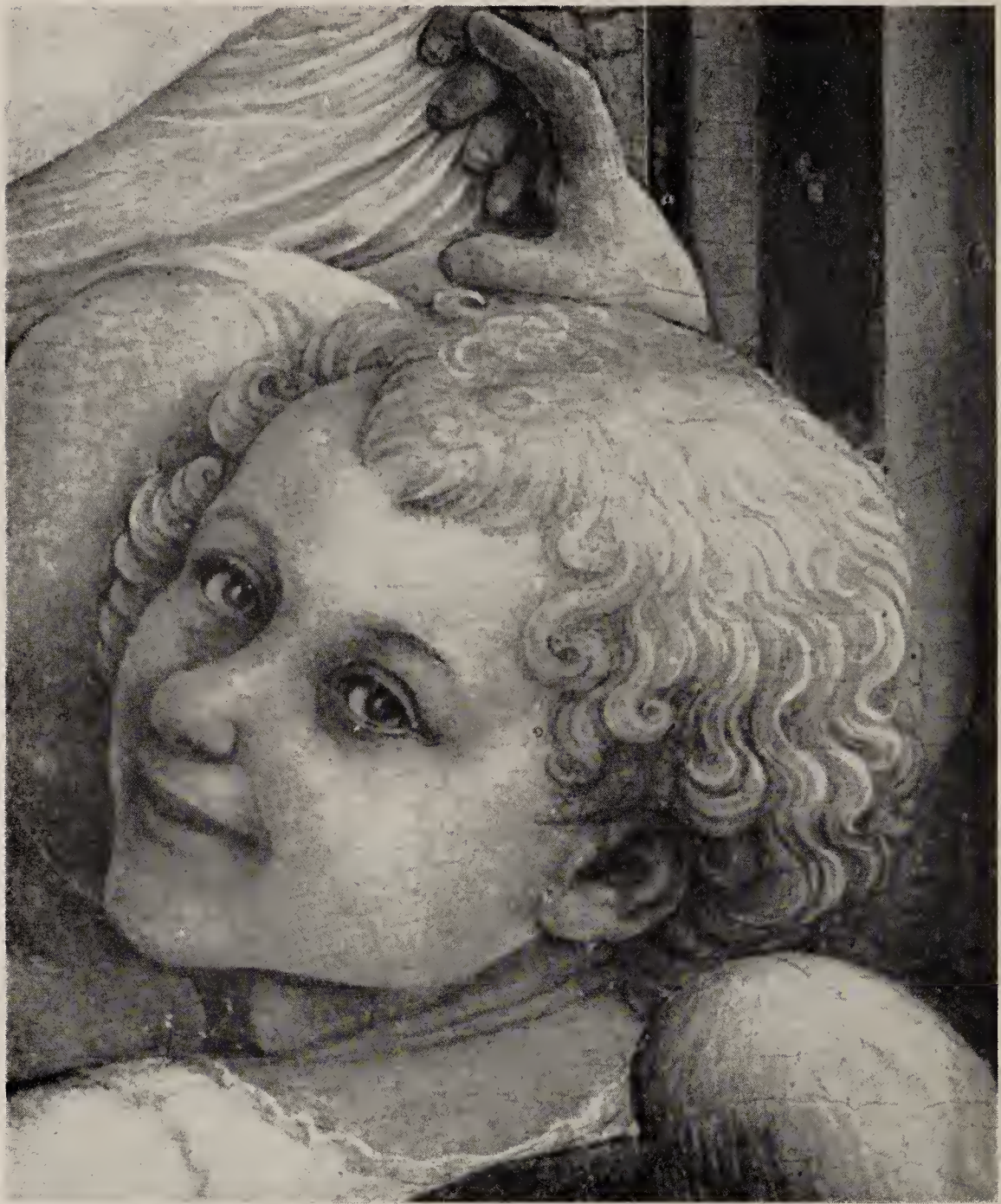


COURTESY OF THE ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON



COURTESY OF THE ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM, BOSTON





DETAIL, FACE OF ANGEL

FILIPPO LIPPI

UFFIZI, FLORENCE, ITALY

Angelico. In the face and pose of the Child is an approach to the qualities of Fra Filippo.

All three of these Pesellino Madonnas have among other characteristics in common, a confinement to a very shallow depth which may have been derived, as Mr. Hendy has suggested, from the study of the high relief sculpture of his contemporary Rossellino. By this artist there is a terracotta relief of the Madonna and Child in the Toledo Museum of the very type which may have influenced





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Pesellino in this respect. Our own relief could not have been known to Pesellino for it was probably done about 1470, nearly fifteen years after his death. But it follows the same scheme used by Rossellino in his earlier work. Its greatest depth is about eight inches. The background is smooth clay unadorned except for the winged cherubs' heads which enliven the upper part of the composition. The Madonna, seated in a chair indicated only by its elaborate arms, supports the Child in an almost standing position.



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MADONNA AND CHILD

PESELLINO

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D.C., KRESS COLLECTION

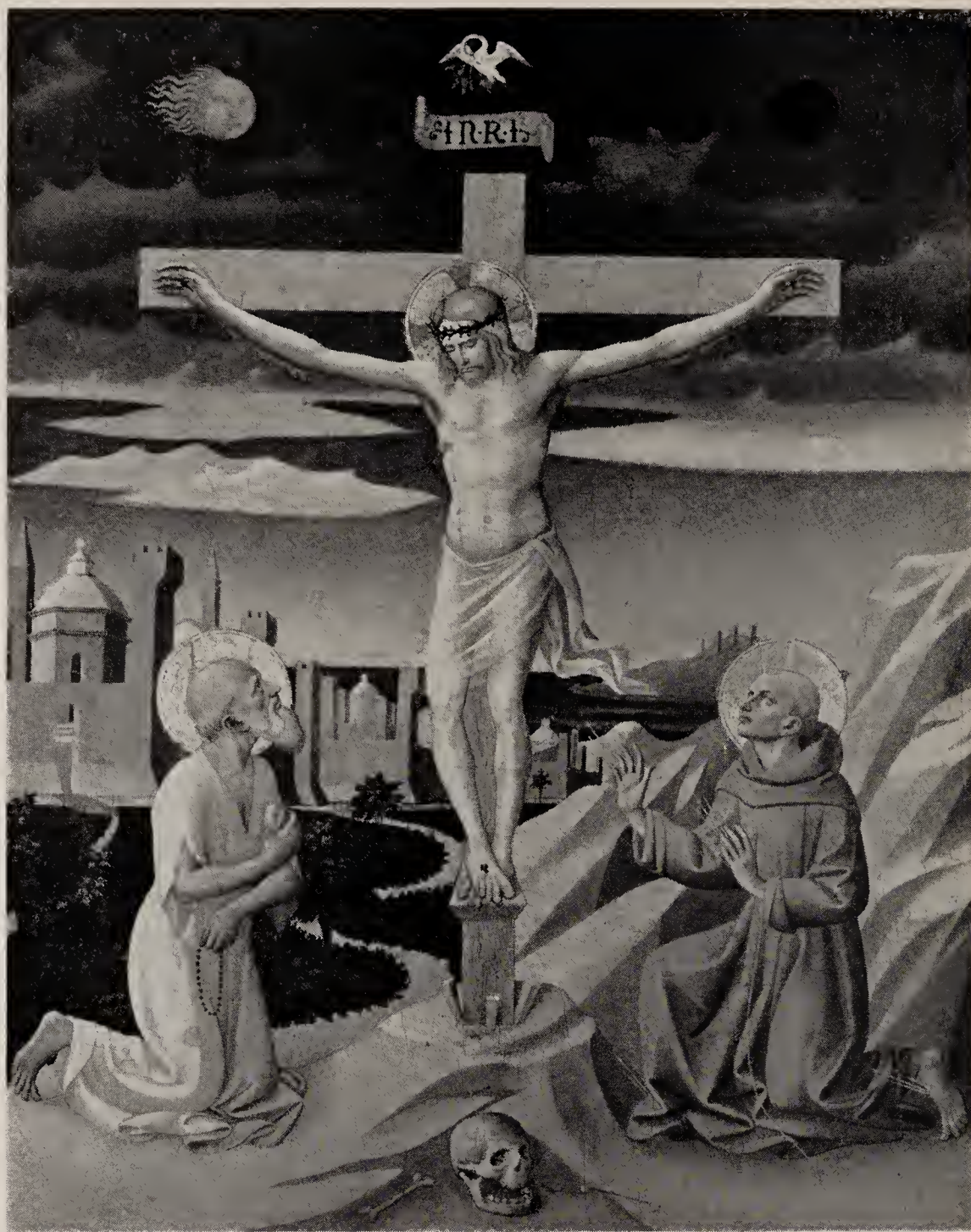




MADONNA AND CHILD - TERRA COTTA RELIEF  
THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART

ANTONIO ROSSELLINO





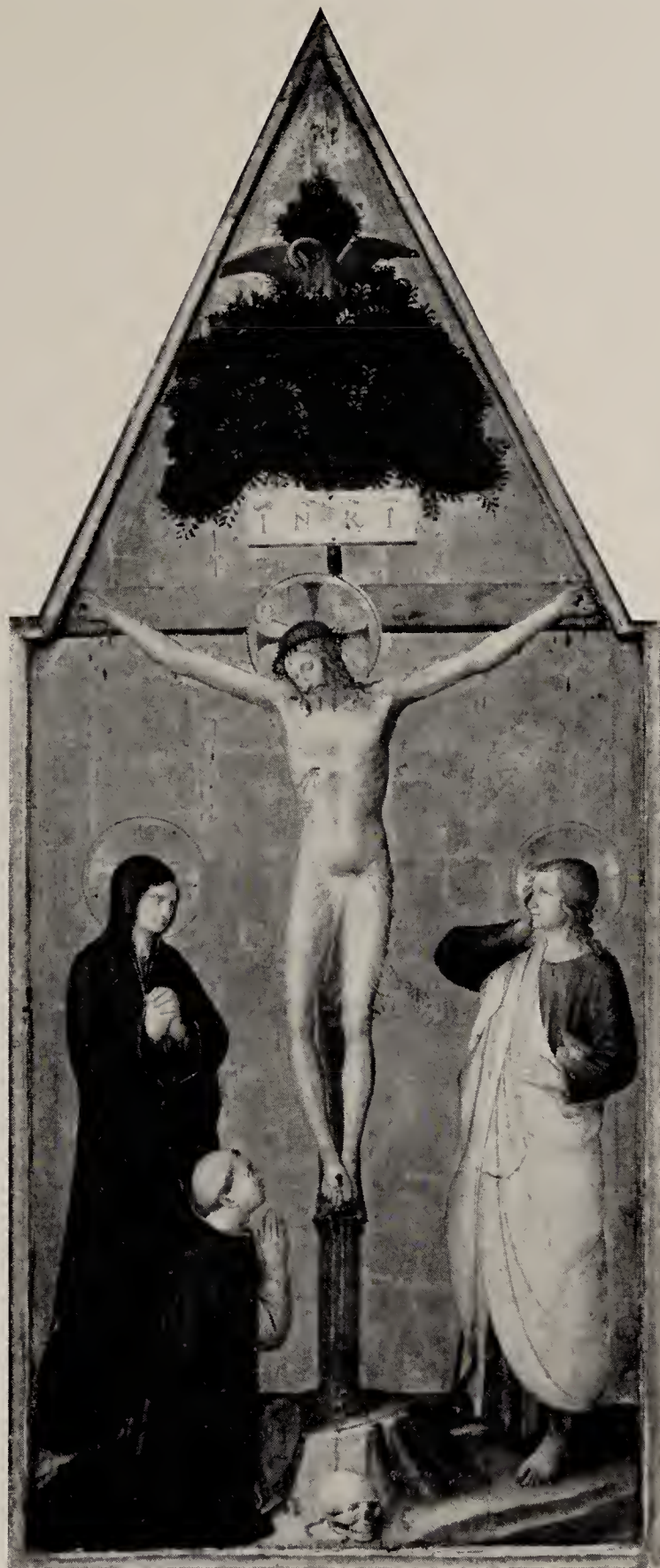
THE CRUCIFIXION WITH ST. JEROME AND ST. FRANCIS

PESELLINO

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, D.C., KRESS COLLECTION

the William Graham collection in 1886, if we correctly identify it, it is listed as the work of Filippo Lippi. In the next year, however, Bode writing of it in his work on the Hainauer Collection, refers to it as "a capital picture by a master who follows close on Fra Filippo, and in whom we may probably recognize Pesellino." It was shown at the Kaiser Friedrich, in Berlin, in 1898 as the work of Pesellino.





THE CRUCIFIXION  
FRA ANGELICO  
COURTESY OF THE FOGG MUSEUM OF ART, HARVARD UNIVERSITY



With so splendid a painting attached to his name more than half a century ago, it would seem that Pesellino should have achieved a high reputation in all the books published since, but even at the time of the Berlin exhibition a critic questioned the attribution. Our picture probably went into the collection of Robert Hoe of New York as the work of Pesellino. When it came up for sale in 1911 it was catalogued as the work of a "follower of Fra Filippo Lippi (probably Giovanni Pesello)." Then while in the Pratt collection it was shown at Duveen Brothers in 1924 attributed to Pesellino but in the catalogue issued two years later, it was assigned to Pier Francesco Fiorentino. At the Fogg Museum it was exhibited in 1927 as the work of Pesellino as it was at the New York and San Francisco World's Fairs in 1939 and 1940. Through all of these years discussions of attribution of the National Gallery Trinity, or portions thereof, were taking place. With such continuous dissention as to the ascription of his two most important works, it is little wonder that his artistic worth and reputation has not been firmly established.

Of Pesellino's life and antecedents certain facts are known. His name is the diminutive of that of his grandfather who was usually called Pesello although he bore the less handy name of Giuliano d'Arrigo di Giuocolo Giuochi. The grandfather was born in 1367. He was among the last of the Italian Gothic artists. He is mentioned as having done numerous artistic chores, such as appraising a statue, modelling a frieze for Or San Michele and competing for the execution of the cupola of the Cathedral. In 1420 he was retained as a substitute for Brunelleschi should any disability prevent his functioning as architect of the Cathedral. For this reason, and because Cosimo de' Medici advanced the funds for his daughter's wedding, it has been argued that he was a man of consequence in his community. It is probable that the golden balls of the Medici arms were as significant then as now, and so we may assume that the loan was made in the ordinary course of business and upon acceptable collateral, rather than as any special favor to a deserving artist. It was not until 1424 that his name appears on the rolls of the artists' Guild of St. Luke. Taxes and the accompanying inquiry into the number and nature of one's dependents were as irksome then as now, but at times the tax record preserved information for posterity. So it is that Pesello's tax return for 1427 informs us that a daughter had been married to a painter, Stefano, was then his widow and was living with her son, Francesco di Stefano, called Pesellino, born in 1422, in the home of her father. There the boy remained, to grow to manhood, to help his aging grandfather, to succeed to the proprietorship of the shop and to carry it on until his death at the age of thirty-five.



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PRINCIPAL REFERENCES TO THE PESELLINO  
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Weisbach, Francesco Pesellino und die Romantik der Renaissance, Berlin, 1901, p. 114, n.5. (Pesellino influence).

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